

FROM UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE
ABILITIES by Lynn Zaritsky

It's time to address political correctness. As a reader once noted, it's getting to that uncomfortable point where you need a lawyer just to talk about us. Like sticks and stones, words can and do hurt - I cringe whenever I hear kids calling each other "retard." We've survived denigrating and inaccurate labels - "crippled," "Mongoloid idiot," "midget," "emotionally disturbed" and "deaf and dumb." We've junked some terms, including "handicapped" (comes from the people begging on the streets, caps in hand) and "challenged."

Now, no one knows what to say. It can be an awkward moment trying to describe a person who has an obvious disability. "Uh, let's see...she's tall, has dark brown hair and brown eyes, and she talks with her hands a lot." The word "Deaf" makes us uncomfortable. So, here is your primer on current political correctness. It's really quite simple: Think "people first."

Disability is something you have, not who you are. As one mother wrote me, "I'm the mother of a 6 year-old boy who happens to have Down syndrome." Jill has a cognitive disability and John has a mental illness. Tracey has cerebral palsy, Jeff has a spinal cord injury, and Audrey has multiple sclerosis. In a "Touched by an Angel" episode, Chris Burke, an actor who has Down syndrome, was confronted by an angry father: "You mean God sent me a retarded angel?" "No," Burke's character replied, "God sent me." Angel first. People first.

There are some exceptions. (Now, you really didn't think it could be that simple, did you?) Where hearing is an issue, people may say they are either "hearing impaired," "hard of hearing," "deaf", or "Deaf" (which refers to the fact that they use American Sign Language and are involved in the Deaf community.) Many people with visual impairment prefer to be called "blind" and many people who have some form of dwarfism prefer to be called "little people" or "people of short stature."

Sometimes these preferences are purely grammatical; "I have deafness" just doesn't fly. Sometimes it's a matter of calling a spade a spade; "I'm blind and no other word will describe it," a friend told me. It's sometimes a matter of degree, since disability often flows along a continuum. When in doubt as to which term to use, just ask.

Equipment also poses social unease. Again, think people first. The person uses the equipment. I am not "wheelchair-bound," as if I were sewn into it. Rather, I use a wheelchair. People use canes, crutches, oxygen, braces and scooters. (And please allow us to use our equipment as little or as frequently as we deem necessary. Not everyone who uses a wheelchair cannot walk at all.)

Just so you will know, parking spaces and bathroom stalls are not "disabled" or "handicapped." They are "accessible." Now that you are all absolutely well-versed in the current political correctness, let me tell you just how flagrantly politically incorrect we can be among ourselves. In my wheelchair crowd, there is a "low-quad," a "high-para" and a few "crips." One of my readers calls himself "Lame Duck." There is signed "Deaf humor."

However, not everyone having a disability would describe himself in these terms, especially those new to disability. Those without disability should never casually take such liberties. Just know that such humor exists in our ranks.

Personally, since even the very name of my rare disease reeks with political incorrectness (stiff-man syndrome) I prefer to say that I have a muscular inhibition and execution deficit associated with a spontaneous and sporadic whole-body freezing phenomenon, combining to result in usual (but by no means total) suppression of ambulation. So there you have it.

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